



UNDERSTANDING VISITOR NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS



TOURISM
EXCELLENCE

Chocolate Gannets

Sue O'James Proprietor

chocolategannets.com.au/

Chocolate Gannets is a complex of four 5 star, fully self contained villas overlooking the Southern Ocean and Great Ocean Road, just east of Apollo Bay.

It is the only 5 star accommodation facility on the Great Ocean Road and one of only two AAA 5 star green rated accommodation properties in Victoria. Sue O'James pride themselves on their property's emphasis on Australian and Victorian products: everything from light fittings and doonas to guest chocolates and tea.

In 2004, Chocolate Gannets was named Best New Tourism Development in the Victorian Tourism Awards, edging out Federation Square for the title. In 2005, it narrowly missed taking the title of Victoria's Best Luxury Accommodation, having been beaten by Crown by just a few points.

Sue O'James previously operated the Tortoise Head Guest Head on French Island, in Victoria's Westernport Bay. It was a 3 star facility and they built-up the business through fine hospitality and their very popular Murder Mystery weekends.

During their time at the guest house they were constantly asked by prospective guests whether the property had spas and open fires.

Consequently, when they sold the business and took time-off to assess what they wanted to do next in the tourism industry, they realised that there was a market need for high quality, eco and child friendly, self-contained accommodation.

Their search for the right location was relatively easy – a superb 100 acre property overlooking the crashing surf and pristine beaches of Bass Strait.



They realised that the harder task would be to achieve the right 'product-market' match. They embarked on an extensive personalised research process in a quest to establish the finest accommodation on the Great Ocean Road.

Despite the growing body of information that was becoming available during the late 1990s, Sue realised that the most reliable and detailed research would come from their own investigation.

The 5 star accommodation sector is fiercely competitive. They realised that their competition would probably not be other self contained accommodation, but some of Victoria's finest hotels. They therefore benchmarked their standards against some of the highest quality and most established accommodation properties in Australia and Great Britain, many of which they personally experienced. They then determined how they could achieve even higher standards.



They soon realised that the biggest market gap was in five star accommodation that catered for groups bigger than couples, especially the family market. They had also observed that ladies travelling in groups of two or three often sought high quality accommodation. They realised that the core market segment they sought lived in Melbourne's inner urban areas. Their advertising is now directed primarily at this market.

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The research didn't stop when they opened the doors of Chocolate Gannets. They have devised a product specific customer feedback form, which, among other questions, invites their guests to rate the property against others they have stayed in. Guests are provided with a reply-paid envelope, which not only ensures anonymity, but also enables them to carefully reflect upon their experience. Forty per cent of guests complete the survey form. The responses are analysed as they are received and daily feedback is provided to staff. Any monthly and seasonal trends arising from the feedback is noted and Sue compiles an annual review of the customer service standards.

The eight per cent of international visitors (mostly U.K, U.S.A. and Singapore) often comment on the 'Australian-ness' of the fittings and consumables.

Eighty per cent of patronage comes from inner Melbourne, which vindicates their original research as to where their market was located.

They are attracting a healthy percentage of families with young children and, contrary to popular belief, they do not wreak havoc upon the furniture and walls, according to Sue.

Forty five per cent of guests rate Chocolate Gannets as the best accommodation they have ever stayed in and another 50 percent state that it is among the best 5 establishments they have ever stayed in.



Sue is qualified in eco-tourism and recreation. Both courses examined changing social trends and she is therefore now an active observer of the marketplace, especially their target segments.

As a result of Sue's research to create a product that caters for a particular market segment, Chocolate Gannets opened its doors at the end of 2002 to an average of 70% occupancy. This has now grown to 93%.

Sue O'James says that nothing in the planning of their facility was left to chance. They invested heavily in the facilities and fittings that the market segment required or aspired to. They insisted that everything within the villas should be as natural as possible.

Key findings:

A major investment in tourism is not such a gamble if the proper research is undertaken beforehand

You need the negative feedback as much as compliments

Always put yourself in the shoes of your customers

See the product from a 'visitor experience' perspective, rather than simply as a business

Continue to observe the needs and trends of the marketplace, especially your market segment.